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LINCOLN AND DARWIN

EXTRAORDINARY CONTRASTS IN THE CAREERS OF THE TWO GREAT
PERSONALITIES OF THE LAST CENTURY WHO WERE BORN ON THE SAME
DAY

BY A. SHERWOOD

THE twelfth day of February 1809, was a memorable one for the world, for into it on that day were born two of the foremost men of the past century, Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin. There could be no more striking contrast than in the careers of these two men. One led a quiet and secluded existence; the other a life of action in the glare of publicity. One came from a distinguished ancestry, the other from almost unknown stock. The coincidence of their birth is the sole fact which at first thought connects them in our minds. Yet there is a certain similarity in their lives which the antithesis of their outer experiences only sets in higher relief.

The story of the boyhood and youth of Lincoln is an interesting one. Born in a miserable log-cabin in the newness of Kentucky; accompanying his parents in their frequent journeys in the effort to find a better livelihood; gaining the scant rudiments of knowledge by the fireside on a winter's evening, with the hearthstones for slate and a bit of charcoal for pencil; equal to the severest feats of manual labour as a young man and respected by his neighbours for his physical strength and courage; borrowing and eagerly reading books of instruction; finding by degrees an opening into politics and law; and finally receiving the gift of the place of highest usefulness, he stood at last in that most difficult position to which any man has ever been called, at the head of a great nation in civil conflict.

His last years were full of burdens and heavy griefs, and the ended war was close followed by his most untimely death.

While America still needed it sorely, that gentle and heroic life was cut down, and he who had spared no service was not spared.

The Early Years of Darwin

During the years that Lincoln, hidden from the sight of all but a few ignorant neighbours, was struggling towards his unknown goal, the young Charles Darwin, here in England, in his father's home at Shrewsbury, was also approaching manhood. With all the professions open to him, he showed an inclination to none of them. The schools of that day, chiefly of the classical order, had no attractions for him. He was fond of outdoor sports, and showed an intense love for such biological studies as he was enabled to pursue at Cambridge. And yet, so little did he dream of what his lifework was to be, that he contemplated entering the ministry of the Church of England, and made some progress in preparing for it.

With much effort he succeeded in taking a degree at Cambridge, and soon thereafter, being recommended by one of his professors, was offered the position of naturalist on board a steamer bound for a five years' trip around the coast of South America. All thought of the clergy was abandoned. His eyes were suddenly and joyfully opened to the future before him. He saw in the realm of biological science the field of usefulness which he had longed for, and his perplexities were put to rest.

On the South American voyage he permanently wrecked his health. Yet with the utmost perseverance he carried on his work, even when obliged, as he said, to "take the horizontal for it."

This courageous persistence became a part of his nature, so that his ill-health throughout life did not, perhaps, greatly diminish the amount of work which he might otherwise have accomplished. It was the source of much suffering, however, and prevented all enjoyments of a social kind. He found life in London too exciting, and was obliged to seek a country home near the little village of Down, some forty miles from London. In this retired place he passed his life with his wife, their nine children, and their servants, and with only an occasional visitor, for receiving his friends was too great a strain upon Darwin's strength. Yet, so conscientious was he in regard to the value of time, that the amount of study and original research which he accomplished was almost prodigious. He wrote many books on biological subjects; and was made a member of scientific societies in almost every country in the world. He received much criticism, but also the highest praise and honours, and had the even greater pleasure of seeing his work steadily gaining in popularity and influence. Retaining his keen interest in scientific problems, and with mind unclouded to the last, he went to the end of life. He died at the age of seventy-three, and was given a grave in Westminster Abbey.

Lincoln and Darwin each stood at the close of an epoch—one in political and civil conditions, the other in the sphere of science and philosophy. They were privileged to be among the world's servants and usher in a new day. The shadows of the eighteenth century still lay across the nineteenth. Men still groped their way amid the dimness of ideas now left far behind. Human slavery was practised in a civilised nation, with all its terrible, far-reaching consequences to both enslaver and enslaved. Mental bondage was hardly less oppressive. Tradition and the Church put rational faith to shame. The intellect was enslaved. All faith was dogmatism, and outside of dogma it was believed there was no salvation. It was a narrowness of faith comparable to that which held the mind when the earth was looked upon as the centre of the universe with the sun revolving around it. To remove this conception seemed to the contemporaries of Galileo to shake the

foundations of religion. Yet the reverse proved to be the case. And this history repeated itself in the time of Darwin.

The Abolition of Slavery

There is a curious parallelism in the case of human bondage. It was claimed that the abolition of slavery would mean the ruin of South America. And precisely the reverse was true. Instead of killing all industries, the removal of slavery remodelled and improved them. It reorganised labour and saved South America from commercial stagnation; for no industries in a slave community can compete with those carried on by free labour. Most of all, the removal of slavery meant the uplifting of millions of human beings, not suddenly, but through that slow process by which all advancement must be attained.

Though the present day finds us not yet on the uplands, we are nearer than we were, and for this we have to thank, among many other heaven-sent guides, Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin. Darwin broke the chains of superstition that held the mind in bondage. Lincoln struck away the shackles from the slave. Lincoln lifted the heart of all mankind to higher conceptions of justice and brotherhood. Darwin lifted the mind from hopeless error to nobler conceptions of the universe and man's destiny. The intellectual courage of the Philosopher and the moral daring of the Liberator achieved results among the greatest bequeathed us by the nineteenth century.

The Publication of "The Origin of Species"

The crowning work in the life of each was the result of some twenty years of study along that special line. In 1837 Darwin first began to see some light upon the problem of the origin of species. With a "working hypothesis" in mind, and with almost incredible patience, he observed in both the plant and animal worlds the limitless variations and adaptations of nature. Every possible objection to his theory he committed to writing as soon as it occurred to him, and if possible found its solution. He evaded nothing, but met fairly every perplexing fact and allowed it due weight. When,

in 1859, he gave the result to the world in his masterly volume, "Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection," few if any criticisms of value were made against the theory which he had not foreseen and at least in some degree dealt with.

It was a work for which the world was waiting. The time was ripe for it, and instantly the scientific world was resounding with discussion. In America the hideous spectre of war was before all eyes, and the first appearance of the book was an event only to specialists in the field of biology. But as time has passed its importance has been increasingly recognised. Darwin, who was, in Huxley's phrase, "the sworn interpreter of Nature in the high court of Reason," had given evidence, not unassailable, indeed, but unshakable, by virtue of his long years of preparation and careful thought.

The Emancipation Proclamation

During practically those same twenty years Lincoln was holding in his mind the problem of human slavery. He had come to the conclusion that a nation could not exist half slave and half free. He believed that if the extension of slavery into the free states could be prevented, there would ultimately be found a way for its extinction. For this he longed and hoped, while taking no course counter to the laws in force, even though they countenanced the greatest wrong which could be legalised. When a young man, Lincoln made a trip up the Sangamon River, in the north of the United States, and on his journey saw "ten or a dozen slaves shackled together." Long afterwards he wrote to a friend, "That sight was a continual torment to me, and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio or any other slave border. It is not fair for you to assume that I have no interest in a thing that has, and constantly exercises, the power of making me miserable." This in 1841, and in 1862 the Emancipation Proclamation was published. It was issued strictly as a war measure. Only the exigencies of war could give the President this power. Years of serious, anxious thought had preceded the act, and when the time and occasion were at hand, with fair warning and without hesitation, he acted.

The Mystery of Mysteries

The moral and mental atmosphere of to-day Lincoln and Darwin did more to create than any other two men. Modern learning was revolutionised by the Darwinian theory of evolution. Evolution was known and accepted long before Darwin's time; but his discovery as to *how* evolution is effected placed the theory upon a verifiable basis, made it something more than mere speculative thought confined to a select and learned circle. Even among the scientists of fifty years ago, evolution was by no means a common theory. Some of the most eminent biologists believed that all species had been created in their present forms and present proportions. The popular mind had no idea of evolution. Those who doubted the literal interpretation of the Biblical account of creation found nothing satisfactory in the "transmutation theory." The origin of species was called the "mystery of mysteries" until Darwin came with his orderly mind, his untiring industry, and a love for biological facts that amounted to genius. Nature could hold her secret no longer. It was charmed from her by this lover of hers, and when he had learned to read the first of her hieroglyphs aright, these held the key to many more.

The "Origin of Species" is the one book never omitted from any list of the most important books of the last century. It shows that while the complications of cause and effect ramify in every direction, they yet follow established and intelligible laws, laws so interwoven as once to appear incapable of extrication. The interest of the world about us is thus intensified a thousand-fold. Whereas before, "It was so created" might serve as answer to every question in the field of natural science, now we are able to find rational causes accounting for conditions upon the earth. The world before was a finished product, a specimen piece of work which we might examine if we chose, but could not comprehend. Now it has become a blossoming flower, still unfolding before our eyes. It was a riddle and hieroglyph. Now it is a wonderful poem, with fresh beauty in every word. It is equally mysterious in itself, but not unintelligible.

Darwin's work in its gigantic proportions would have been impossible without many pioneers to blaze the way. Leibnitz, Buffon, Lamarck, and St. Hilaire were all forerunners of his. He was eager to give credit to his humblest co-workers. "I am well aware," he said, "that my books could never have been written, and would not have made any impression upon the public mind, had not an immense amount of material been collected by a long series of admirable observers; and it is to them that honour is chiefly due." He owed perhaps as much to the contemporary effort as Lincoln did, and he gave thanks with the same generosity and self-effacement. Lincoln's work would have been impossible without Seward, Chase, Sherman, Sheridan, Grant—to name a few in a long list. On the other hand, many of Lincoln's advisers and generals were grievous hindrances, while the men of science of that day who did not go to Darwin with words of encouragement were the exceptions.

Huxley's Praise of Darwin

No one could be less eager for fame than Darwin was, or more surprised that fame should come to him. He could sincerely say that it mattered not who found the Truth, so only the Truth was found. The utmost care was not too much to bestow upon the most trifling point, if thereby he felt some hope of arriving nearer to the truth. If in any statement he made the slightest error he could not rest till he had made correction; and praise which he felt to be greater than he deserved gave him actual pain. His nature was supremely sympathetic. His perfect kindness and exquisite courtesy were the natural expressions of a sincere heart and a mind unable to pretend. Huxley, who never praised unduly even his best-loved friends, said of Darwin, "They [the present generation] think of him who bore this name as a rare combination of genius, industry, and unswerving veracity, who earned his place among the most famous men of his age by sheer native power, in the teeth of a gale of popular prejudice, and, notwithstanding provocations which might have excused any outbreak, kept himself clear of all envy, hatred, and malice, nor dealt

otherwise than fairly and justly with the unfairness and injustice showered upon him; while to the end of his days he was ready to listen with patience and respect to the most insignificant of reasonable objectors."

These words would apply almost equally well to Lincoln, in whose life there shone the same utter freedom from envy, hatred, malice, and from self-love and ambition. Ceaseless criticism, charges of the lowest motives, malignant enmity, none of these seemed to move him to an instant's anger. With perfect calmness he proceeded on his way. It mattered not to him who saved the Union, nor who received the credit for it, so only the Union was saved. Ambition of the right kind he assuredly had, but tainted with no desire for applause. When, early in his career, he said, "My highest ambition is for the esteem of my fellow citizens," we cannot, in the light of his life, doubt the depth of his earnestness, lightly as such words might be spoken by others.

Darwin on the Abolition of Slavery

There is no recorded word of Darwin's regarding Lincoln, although he lived seventeen years after Lincoln's death. But in regard to slavery Darwin wrote to Asa Gray in 1861: "Great God! how I should like to see the greatest curse on earth, slavery, abolished!" And again, later in the same year, "If abolition does follow with your victory, the whole world will look brighter in my eyes and in many eyes."

It is remarkable that of these two men he who was once a backwoodsman and rail-splitter should have added to literature, apparently unstudied, some of its finest utterances; while the other, bred in a scholarly atmosphere, found all literary expression extremely difficult and only by the most laborious efforts acquired a lucid style. Both men had a sense of humour—a saving sense, it was in Lincoln's case. In Darwin its playful gleams light up his correspondence and give us delightful glimpses into his mind.

Darwin became in theory an agnostic, while Lincoln acquired a religious attitude of mind. Yet in all life's relations they were equally true. Some words from an account which Darwin wrote of his little

daughter reveal as much his own tender nature as the charming personality of the child:

It was delightful and cheerful to behold her. Her dear face now rises before me as she used sometimes to come running downstairs with a stolen pinch of snuff for me, her whole form radiant with the pleasure of giving pleasure. Besides her joyousness, she was in her manners remarkably cordial, frank, open, straightforward, natural, and without any shade of reserve. Her whole mind was pure and transparent. One felt one knew her thoroughly and could trust her . . . In the last short illness her conduct was in simple angelic. She never once complained; never became fretful; was ever considerate of others and was thankful in the most gentle, pathetic manner for everything done for her. When so exhausted that she could hardly speak she praised everything that was given her, and said some tea was "beautifully good." When I gave her some water, she said, "I quite thank you," and these, I believe, were the last precious words addressed by her dear lips to me.

We have lost the joy of our household and the solace of our old age. She must have known how we loved her. Oh, that she could now know how deeply, how tenderly, we do still and shall ever love her dear, joyous face! Blessings on her!

Lincoln, too, stood by the graves of his children. His experiences, indeed, were many of them tragic. If Americans jealously reserve their highest honours for Washington, yet the present generation is so close to Lincoln that unconsciously they give him their most intimate love. There are still many who remember him as a living presence; who looked upon him almost as the pillar of fire leading through the night in a divinely appointed path; and who clearly recall the terrible hour of his death. Few, indeed, have been the calumniators of Lincoln since that hour, which came so cruelly at a time when the noblest hopes and ambitions made life infinitely precious to him.

With Darwin the reverse was the case. Completing his life in peace, his death did not silence his enemies. If they paused for a moment, reflecting upon the remarkably lovable nature of the man, yet even this was soon forgotten. With no

possible ground for personal malice, calm argument was not sufficiently forcible to satisfy them. To this day there are those who speak slightly of Darwin, entirely missing the significance of his work.

As Lincoln alone can be placed beside Washington in his work for the advancing of liberty and the human race, so Darwin alone can be placed beside Newton, that mighty intellect of the world, in his work for the advancement of knowledge. There should be no attempts to invest the memory of either with unreal virtues. We would know each as he was, without a halo, as both, haters of all deception, would have wished. Both made mistakes. Lincoln's idea of negro colonisation was extremely visionary, and historians will no doubt always disagree as to the wisdom of his course respecting various events. Darwin's pangenesis-theory was wildly hypothetical, and some of his deductions are found to be in error, while others are still in question among biologists. And though both Lincoln and Darwin were notable for clear insight and good judgment, each clung with tenacity to his erroneous theory. Errors like these, however, do not lessen our reverence and gratitude, nor should they. Reverence for greatness is one of the uplifting forces of the world. Revering the almost divine patience with which Lincoln went through the days of storm and stress, we revere it anew in the long years of suffering and toil which Darwin so cheerfully underwent. Admiring the total indifference to fame which Lincoln displayed, we admire it again in Darwin, whose labour was wholly a labour of love for scientific truth. Touched by Lincoln's tireless sympathy and kindness, we likewise treasure in our thoughts the gentleness of Darwin.

On the day of their birth these two were sundered apparently as far by heritage, environment, and destiny as by the ocean that rolled between them. Yet they had more in common than the primal virtues of courage and honesty which we find in all great men. And for what they were, as well as for what they achieved, the world will for ever love the memory of the American of Americans and the Sage of Down.